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Ben Dorfman

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AN INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Prospectus

The **purpose** of the study described in this prospectus – *An Introduction to Historical Phenomenology* – is to elucidate the concept of “historical phenomenology.”

“Historical phenomenology” has three elements. First, it asserts that the essential characteristic of knowledge is its *historicality*, or quality of being *historical*. That is to say that, in the production of knowledge, knowledge becomes oriented toward the “past,” be that past real or “imagined.” As oriented toward the past, however, knowledge becomes essentially organized around the operations of *negation*. Negation is understood here less in the sense that “consciousness continually experiences itself as the nihilation of its past being” (Sartre) than that “just as each stakes his own life, so must he seek the other’s death” (Hegel). In other words, the generation of knowledge claimed as either *new* or *different* involves at least the *involvement* with the processes of the annihilation of “past,” “older” or historically “previous” knowledge.¹ In the context of such processes, however, “history” is to be understood as the history of ideas, or “intellectual history” in what we might characterize as a specifically “phenomenological” manner. In other words, akin to the Husserlian “*epoché* [“bracketing”] from all practical interests” and Schopenhauer’s claim that “everything exists for knowledge,” historical phenomenology asserts that history exists only “ideologically,” or not as a function of politics or “false consciousness,” but simply on the field of “ideas” – i.e., in relation to language, the imagination and “concepts,” as such.²

The **significance** of the claims of historical phenomenology comes in three areas. First, historical phenomenology restores the *idea* of history to prominence within the

¹ Sartre (1992, 64); Hegel (1977, 114).

² Husserl (1965, 168); Schopenhauer (1969, 3).

human sciences. In other words, against claims to trans-historical biological-mental processes (cognitivism), linguistic processes (linguistics), social processes (sociology), economic processes (economics) or even political processes (political science) – i.e., claims to either “human nature,” “natural” nature or skeletal historical dynamics – historical phenomenology posits history as generating *itself*. In other words, the first condition for history is its *historicality* or, again, quality of being historical. To this extent, then, insofar as biological-mental, sociological, economic and political processes are historical, they become the sources of *themselves* – i.e., biology/mind, society, economics and politics become phenomenological unto themselves. The second significance to the claims of historical phenomenology, however, is that the claims of historical phenomenology attack the idea of a strict division between past and present. In other words, while the organization of knowledge around the processes of negation by way of the idea of history involves at least the *involvement* with the processes of the annihilation of “past,” “older” or historically “previous” knowledge, this “involvement” involves the extension of the present, regardless of its mode of constitution, *toward* the past. Historical phenomenology thus leaves us with the proposition that it is at this moment – the extension of the present toward the past – that the past itself becomes constituted as both “reality” and idea. This is less in the sense that “no man has ever lived in the past” (Schopenhauer), but that in fact *because* future and past “exist only in the connection and continuity of knowledge.”³ Finally, then, the last significance of the claims of historical phenomenology is that they assert the *theoretical* task of the human sciences to be the explication of the structure and modes of existence of the historical – i.e., the forms and ways in which history *is* – and the human scientific *analytical* task of the human sciences to be an explication of the phenomenal appearance of the historical within the “cultural” domain, or among the artifacts and entities perceived to populate the “life-world” if, indeed, not the perceived existence of the “life-world” in its totality.

The **process** for the elucidation of “historical phenomenology” will run as follows:

³ Schopenhauer (1969, 278). Nietzsche also captures this idea in the assertion that “only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present may you interpret the past”: the past gains its presence in the consecration of the present, entering at that point into the realm of “pure ideas,” or “art.” Nietzsche (1980, 37).

1. A comparison of “historical phenomenology” to other varieties of phenomenology and philosophical fields related to phenomenology, especially those functioning in close reference to the question of history.

The key fields concerning this comparison will be the following:

- Hegelian phenomenology
- Diltheyan hermeneutics
- Husserlian phenomenology
- Heideggarian phenomenology
- Gadamerian hermeneutics
- Ricoeurian hermeneutics

2. A reassessment of the idea of “intellectual history” to comprehend it as a phenomenological endeavor.

By “a reassessment of the idea of ‘intellectual history’ to comprehend it as a phenomenological endeavor,” I am indicating the attempt to distinguish between phenomenological “intellectual history” – i.e., historical phenomenology as relying on a “history of ideas” – and intellectual history as practiced with contemporary historical science. Generally, contemporary historical sciences under the heading of “intellectual history” either traces an evolution of so-called “unit ideas,” traces the social and political “contexts” for the generation of “great ideas” (social and political history of ideas), or attempts to “fathom the meanings of...texts” with an aim toward “authorial intentions.”⁴ Again, while the primary move will be to separate out “phenomenological” intellectual history from the intellectual history of contemporary historical science, it will nonetheless be argued that the intellectual history of contemporary historical science

⁴ Lovejoy (1948, 9); Iggers (1997, 127).

relies if not on the *epoché*, then at least on the Husserlian *eidic reduction* – a reduction of ideas and their contexts to ideas in their “essence.”

3. An engagement with the theoretical and analytical tasks for human science prescribed by historical phenomenology.

In view of historical phenomenology’s sustenance of theoretical and analytical tasks – i.e., the explication of the structure and modes of existence of the historical and explicating the phenomenal appearance of the historical within the “cultural” domain – historical phenomenology will engage these “tasks” in two parts.

a. Elucidating the structure and modes of being of the historical.

This will be done in special contradistinction to Heidegger’s thesis on historicity, Gadamer’s concepts of “horizon” and “tradition” in relation to historical consciousness and Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of historical consciousness.” Reference will also be made to “classic” historicism (e.g., Ranke, Droysen, Burckhardt, Dilthey), Marxism and structuralism and post-structuralism (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida).

b. Analyzing the phenomenal appearance of the historical in the cultural domain.

This will be done by way of a “discourse analysis” organized around two topics: “the book” and “the body.” Currently, it is predicted that two collections will be analyzed: David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery’s (eds.) *The Book History Reader* and Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco’s (ed.) *The Body: A Reader*.⁵ The point will be understanding not only the historicity of the *relations* between the different ideas represented within these texts on the book and the body, but the phenomenal appearance of these texts in relation to the historicity of those discourses, histo-

ricality itself and, ultimately, historicity as accounting for the variegated discourses on “books” and “bodies” as well as “books” and “bodies” in their existential status.

In **summary**, *An Introduction to Historical Phenomenology* is intended to have connections to philosophy, history and cultural studies. The intention is to introduce a new ground concept for human science that will be a central theoretical and analytical tool. In terms of theory, historical phenomenology is intended to reinvigorate the idea of history. In terms of analysis, historical phenomenology is intended to make the phenomenal appearance of the historical within culture the central point in human scientific analysis, as well as guide analysis back to the domain of theory insofar as theory concerns itself with the explication of the structure and modes of existence of the historical.

⁵ See Finkelstein (2001); Fraser and Greco (2004).

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